

CARGO IN CRISIS:

COVID-19's Impact on Southern
California Port Truck Drivers



CHANGE to WIN

SUMMARY

- In a survey of 651 port truck drivers, 68% report receiving less pay in the last month due to the COVID-19 pandemic as cargo volumes have dropped and wait-times have increased.
- 70% of port drivers feel that the trucking companies are not doing enough to keep them safe on the job, and 64% report that they have not received any virus safety information or supplies.
- While facing these unsafe working conditions, 82% of drivers say they have no paid sick days and 84% of drivers do not have health insurance coverage through their port trucking job. Drivers report that they feel pressured to work while sick in order to earn enough money to pay their bills.

BACKGROUND

The spread of the COVID-19 virus has created massive disruptions in the US economy, while shining a spotlight on the working conditions of essential workers. As millions of Americans stay at home, workers in the logistics and transportation sector take on the burden of transporting essential goods amidst a worsening public health crisis. Port truck drivers, despite their designation as essential workers, are placed in an even more precarious position due to their status as misclassified independent contractors. Misclassified port truck drivers do not have access to paid sick days, often lack health insurance coverage, and face barriers in qualifying for unemployment benefits. In addition to denying drivers these basic protections, trucking companies that misclassify their drivers also require drivers to shoulder truck payments and related costs like insurance, which continue to pile up if drivers are not working.

At the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, an estimated 80 percent of drivers are classified as independent contractors.¹ These drivers are responsible for moving almost half of U.S. container imports out of the ports and into the warehouses of major brands and retailers.² Port drivers began feeling the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, when the San Pedro Bay ports saw a severe drop in cargo volume as China shut down its manufacturing. The first quarter of 2020 is expected to be the San Pedro Bay ports' biggest decline in cargo volume since the 2008 financial crisis.³



Though Chinese production has begun ramping up as of March 2020, analysts forecast another dip in cargo import volumes due to decreased demand from consumers in the United States.⁴ Some analysts warn that a rebound in import demand may not occur until 2021, meaning that container volumes—and work for port truck drivers—will remain depressed for the foreseeable future.⁵

The COVID-19 crisis has created a double-bind for port truck drivers: drivers have both less work, and no safety net due to their misclassification as independent contractors.

PORT TRUCK DRIVER SURVEY

In order to better understand the pandemic's impact on port truck drivers, Change to Win conducted a bilingual online survey in March 2020. The survey ran from March 24, 2020 to April 5, 2020 and recruited participants through Facebook ads. There were 651 responses from active or out-of-work port truck drivers.

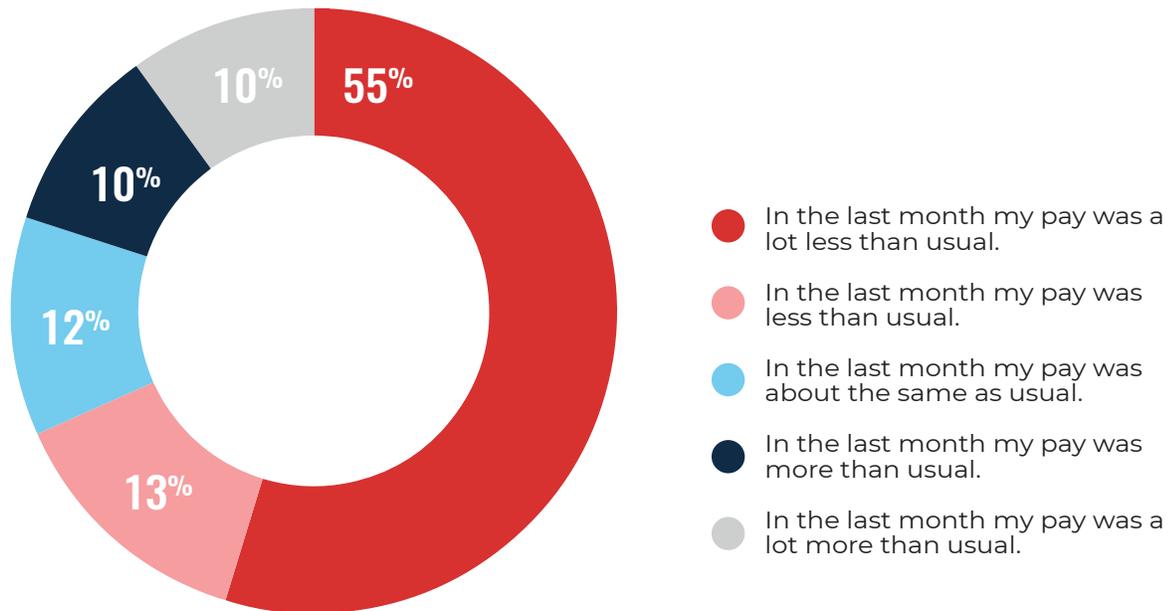


The survey results are consistent with previous accounts of working conditions for port truck drivers. Drivers shoulder the responsibility of truck-related expenses while being financially dependent on their employers, meaning that when drivers receive less work, they struggle to pay their weekly truck expenses in addition to other bills. During the pandemic, most driver participants in the survey

report that neither the ports nor the trucking companies have provided drivers with virus safety information or personal protective equipment. While facing these unsanitary working conditions, most drivers have no paid sick leave and no health insurance through their employers, giving them very few options but to go to work while sick. Some key findings of the survey to follow.

OVER THE LAST MONTH, DRIVERS REPORT RECEIVING LESS PAY, LESS WORK, AND ARE STRUGGLING WITH THEIR EXPENSES.

PORT DRIVERS' PAY DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC



68% OF DRIVERS REPORT THAT THEIR PAY WAS LESS THAN NORMAL IN THE LAST MONTH.



55% OF DRIVERS SAID THAT THEIR PAY WAS A LOT LESS THAN USUAL.

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What I work is very little, so my salary is very little.

–Survey Respondent [Spanish]

Without a job we can't pay the bill to the bank every month for insurance, diesel and rent where I live.

–Survey Respondent [Spanish]

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MANY DRIVERS SHARED HOW LESS WORK DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK HAS MADE IT HARDER TO PAY THEIR BILLS

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More than anything is affecting me monetary [sic] cause of my bills and it's stressful and scary at the same time having to go to work if you can... we sometimes wait all day just to get 1 load out of the harbor.

–Survey Respondent [English]

I've been out of work since 3 weeks ago due to the virus.

–Survey Respondent [English]

There's no work and the ports don't help, there are big lines over 3 hours...

–Survey Respondent [Spanish]

Well, we have very little work, and when we work we find the ports full of trucks that last 3 to 4 hours to get a load out.

–Survey Respondent [Spanish]

Not working for more than a month is affecting my payments. I have never made a late payment before so I will be behind in my payments next month.

–Survey Respondent [Spanish]

I have 4 weeks of not working, and at this moment I don't have anything to pay my rent and lease payments that I need to make... I don't qualify for unemployment, I am about to collapse, it is very sad this situation.

–Survey Respondent [Spanish]

I've had fewer hours of work and it's affected me a lot financially.

–Survey Respondent [Spanish]

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A MAJORITY OF DRIVERS DO NOT FEEL SAFE, AND DO NOT FEEL THAT TRUCKING COMPANIES OR THE PORTS HAVE TAKEN NECESSARY PRECAUTIONS.



REPORT THEY HAVE NOT BEEN GIVEN VIRUS SAFETY INFORMATION OR SUPPLIES AT WORK.

“ I would like both the Companies and the Ports of L.A. and Long Beach to provide us with safety equipment (for the companies) and in the Ports to be obliged to respect the 3 feet distance, since in the Troubleshooting windows there are crowds and at the same time they do not close either in the 15 minute intervals or at lunchtime, this would be temporary while this Health Emergency lasts (Pandemic Covid-19)

–Survey Respondent [Spanish]

...this crisis is affecting us a lot and the companies do not offer us any protection. I would like for the companies to help us to be more protected.

–Survey Respondent [Spanish]

I think the company should at least supply the masks and the gloves to everyone.

–Survey Respondent [English]





DID NOT FEEL THE COMPANY THEY WORKED FOR WAS DOING ENOUGH TO KEEP THEM SAFE AT WORK DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS.

COMMENTS ALSO SINGLED OUT THE LA/LB PORTS FOR NOT KEEPING THEIR FACILITIES SANITARY.



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The ports are not doing enough to avoid the infections, primarily the terminals that use phones to attend to the drivers.

–Survey Respondent [Spanish]

The ports aren't doing their part to clean work phones or petastools [sic] nor do they care to clean they aren't even trying to help port drivers.

–Survey Respondent [English]

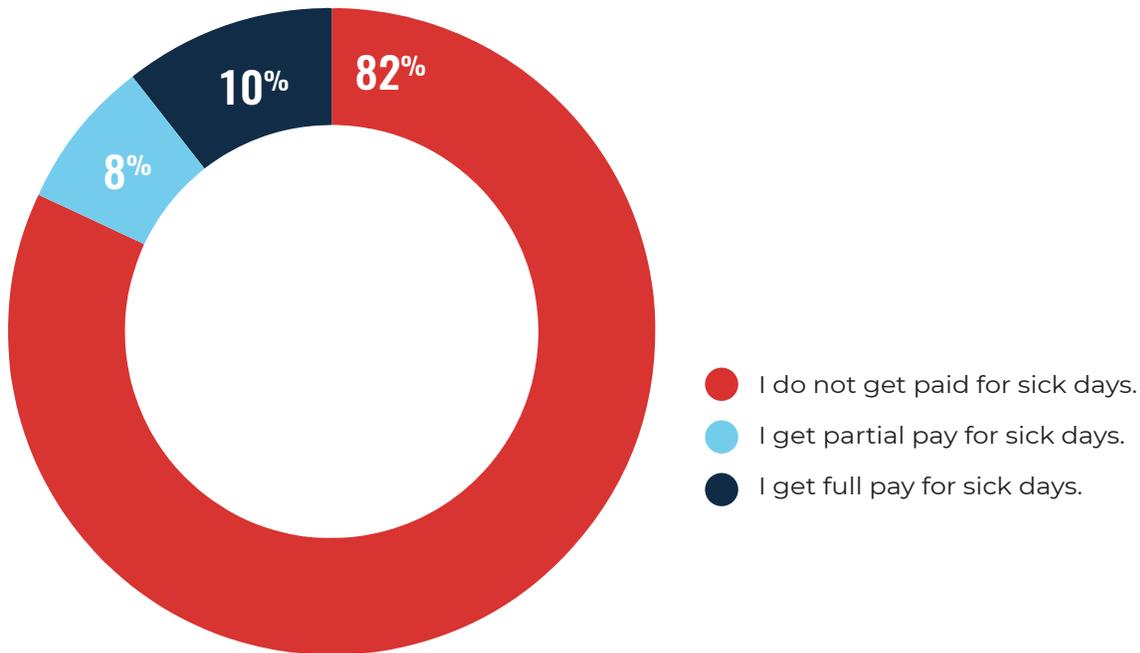
Everything is going worse and nobody is providing gear to fight against this pandemic... LB/LA ports should be doing more like disinfecting specific places where we the stay like windows, speakers, etc.

–Survey Respondent [English]

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**A MAJORITY OF DRIVERS DO NOT HAVE PAID SICK DAYS.
NEARLY HALF DO NOT HAVE HEALTH INSURANCE.**

IF YOU GET SICK AND CANNOT WORK, WILL YOU GET PAID FOR DAYS OFF?



82% REPORT THEY WILL NOT GET PAID FOR SICK DAYS.

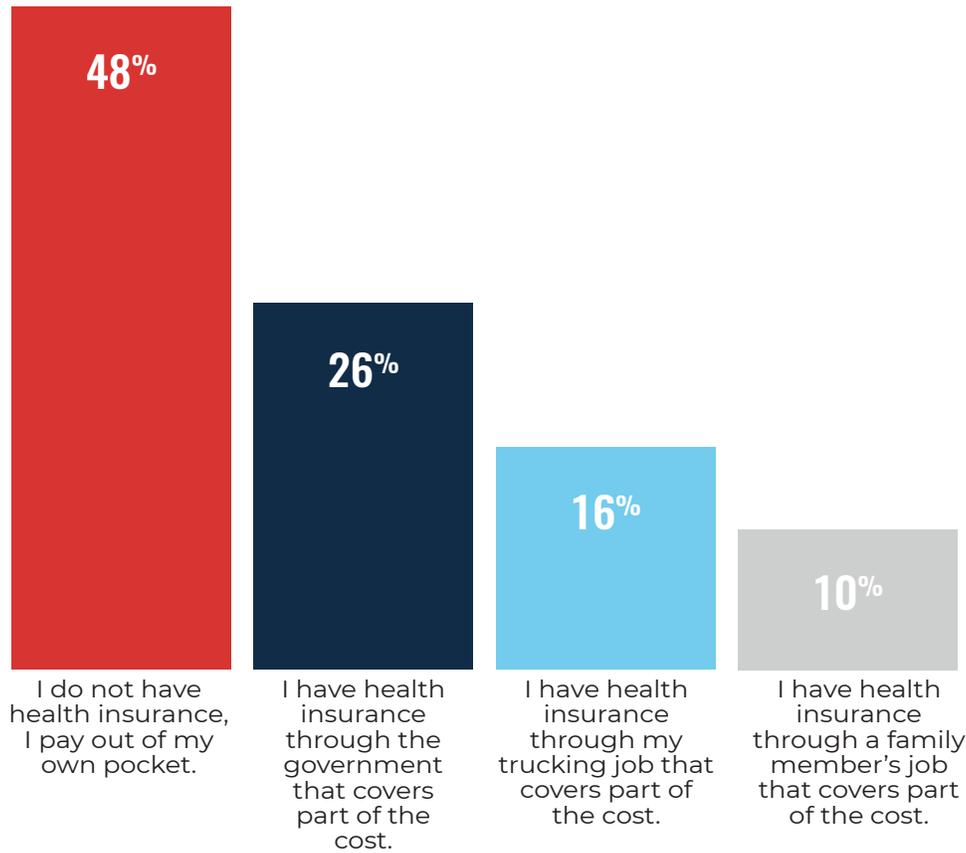
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I feel that they are not taking the necessary measures for our health, if any driver is afraid to go to work because of what he is going through, the company will not pay for a single day lost even if you are sick, I got a mild flu from which I am already cured, I told them I was sick, and they did not care.

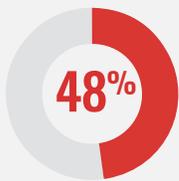
–Survey Respondent [Spanish]

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IF YOU GET SICK AND NEED TO GO TO THE DOCTOR, HOW WILL YOU PAY FOR CARE?



84% OF DRIVERS DO NOT RECEIVE HEALTH INSURANCE THROUGH THEIR TRUCKING JOB.



48% HAVE NO COVERAGE AT ALL AND PAY OUT OF THEIR OWN POCKET WHEN THEY NEED HEALTHCARE.

¹ Roosevelt, Margo. "Truckers, dockworkers suffer as coronavirus chokes LA, Long Beach ports cargo." Los Angeles Times, March 7, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2020-03-07/la-fi-coronavirus-ports-california-economy> and "The Big Rig Overhaul: Restoring Middle-Class Jobs at America's Ports Through Labor Law Enforcement." National Employment Law Project, February 2014. <https://www.nelp.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Big-Rig-Overhaul-Misclassification-Port-Truck-Drivers-Labor-Law-Enforcement.pdf>

² Murphy, Brett. "Rigged." USA Today, June 16, 2017. <https://www.usatoday.com/pages/interactives/news/rigged-forced-into-debt-worked-past-exhaustion-left-with-nothing/>

³ "LA's Expenses Rise Amid 'Economic Uncertainty' Due to Coronavirus." Patch, March 2, 2020. <https://patch.com/california/los-angeles/las-expenses-rise-amid-economic-uncertainty-due-coronavirus> and "US supply chains and ports under strain from coronavirus." Financial Times, March 2, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/5b5b8990-5a98-11ea-a528-dd0f971feb9c>

⁴ He, Hui Feng. "Coronavirus: China's small factories brace for 'big hit' as pandemic erodes overseas demand." South China Morning Post, March 14, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3075099/coronavirus-chinas-small-factories-brace-big-hit-pandemic>

⁵ Miller, Greg. "Ocean shipping services continue to deteriorate." Freightwaves, April 1, 2020. <https://www.freightwaves.com/news/ocean-shipping-services-continue-to-deteriorate>

⁶ Change to Win "Port Trucking Pandemic Response Survey." All survey results are from this source.